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ABSTRACT

Athol Fugard's "Master Harold...and the boys" and Toni Morrison's "Bluest Eye" underscore the necessity of encouraging and providing opportunities for African American students to explore their own constructions of self. In the former work, "It's not fair, is it Hally?" becomes a universal human refrain at the same time that it becomes, at another level, a stick that whites can use to beat blacks out to the margins of society. In the latter work, Claudia, the protagonist, manages to construct a self which eschews self-hatred, partly using Pecola as her other. Pecola, however, has a much more difficult time contending with her anger and shame because by white standards she is ugly; she is ashamed because the white storekeeper fails to validate her presence. If instructors are to help students respond to Morrison's call for love of self, they must talk about the construction of themselves so they have the strength to make a difference in a multicultural makeup of their own institutions. Perhaps the questions that Morrison problematizes are applicable: (1) Why do black women, according to the narrator of her novel, use the eye slide when they approach white girls?; (2) What is the magic that Morrison suggests little white girls, and little white dolls weave on whites and on black women?; and (3) Why might Claudia, the narrator, transfer her hatred of white dolls to little white girls? African literature and African American literature speak eloquently to students as they explore their own constructions of self. (TB)

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"It's not fair, is it, Hally?": African and African American Literature in the Classroom

Barbara Stevens Heusel

ED 375 426

(Paper presented at the College English Association Conference, Orlando, FL, April 8, 1994 on the panel, entitled "Questions, Ideas, and Concerns We Brought Back from the 1993 Penn State Multicultural Conference in US Literature, Putting Theory into Practice)

This academic year my students have benefited from insights I experienced at the Multicultural Conference at Penn State in the summer of 1993. My seminar leader Houston Baker reinforced, with his dramatic keynote address, my 30-year interest in African American culture, which began in our mutual hometown of Louisville: I discovered that I came from the side of Louisville that diminished Houston's side--what he called little Africa, a term I'd never heard. More dramatically, he revealed to our seminar group his fears about the extermination of young black men. He encouraged us to see the violent movie Menace II Society. Many analysts argue that black masculine self-hate is the major contributing factor to the war of black men against black men as it is depicted in the movie. My contribution to the discourse on this subject, as evidenced in African and African American texts, is decidedly from the perspective of a white woman.

As you know, my title comes from a racist, "so-called" joke in Athol Fugard's "Master Harold" . . . and the boys. In the play Sam, a black-African

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male servant takes on the responsibility of surrogate father, surrepticiously rearing--at least psychologically--a white middle-class boy whose father is an alcoholic. The servant recognizes that someone must help Master Harold, whom he calls Hally, to love and respect himself. As Hally (reminiscent of Prince Hal) has grown, Sam has participated in his young master's education by working with him on his homework assignments. On the day the play is set Hally has to write an essay on an annual event of cultural significance. Because Sam and Willie, another servant, are practicing for a ballroom dance competition, Hally and Sam begin using this championship event as a metaphor for life--a dream world where everyone has practiced their steps and accidents don't happen. Hally entitles his essay "A World Without Collisions," subtitled "Global Politics on the Dance Floor" or "Ballroom Dancing as a Political Vision." (47).

When the young Hally discovers that his crippled father is coming home from the hospital to once again make Hally's life miserable, Hally turns mean and tells Sam that he and his father will have fun sharing their favorite joke. His father will say: "It's not fair, is it, Hally?" and Hally will say: "What?" and his father will answer: "A nigger's arse" (55). All the men in the play as well as the mother have reasons to think that life is not fair. "It's not fair, is it Hally?" becomes a universal human refrain at the same time that it becomes, at another level, a stick that whites can use to beat blacks out to the margins of society. Such language is the primary means of internalizing cultural values. The audience watches ideology in action as Sam realizes that all his years of teaching Hally to be a courageous man have failed and that Hally, who subsequently spits is Sam's face, will never be able to get beyond hating himself. Hally, a white South African, becomes violent because he can't love his father or himself.

An artist who celebrates self love as well as self hate, and in addition analyses both genders is Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison. Claudia, the protagonist of The Bluest Eye, says she could not love her white doll, so much like the ones black adults would say they "used-to-cry-[their]-eyes-out-for" (21). Except for the blond hair, the doll in question is reminiscent of the Shirley Temple doll: "the single-stroke eyebrows," "the pearlly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips," the turned-up nose," "the glassy blue eyeballs," "the yellow hair . . . [Claudia says] I could not love it" (20). This last line echoes and reverses the choric lines Morrison gives to Baby Suggs in Beloved. The grandmother Baby Sugg preaches to her flock: "Here . . . in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. . . . They don't love your eyes . . . You got to love [them], you! (88). Morrison argues that one must love, nourish, and support the self one spends a lifetime constructing; otherwise one is committing self sabotage.

Beloved's exploration of male and female bonding critiques the gendered myths taught in the first years of life. Also in The Bluest Eye Morrison argues that along with its mother's milk, a child eats the commercial sweets or values of a capitalistic society. The prized sweet candies called Mary Janes not only dull the anger of Pecola Breedlove, a lower class child in The Bluest Eye, but teach her that the wrapper alone, with a smiling white face, blond hair and blue eyes, can comfort and control, like drugs and tobacco--a significant success in neutralizing social revolution.

Pecola suffers so intensely from family violence, and thus self-hatred, that she whispers into her hand: "'Please [God], make me disappear.' She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. . . . [Slowly her body parts disappear. The stomach was hard to make disappear.] The face

was hard, too. . . Only her tight, tight eyes were left"(39). Claudia, the protagonist, manages to construct a self which eschews self hatred, partly using Pecola as her Other; Pecola has a much more difficult time surviving. Morrison stresses that Pecola has more anger and shame to contend with. Being ugly--according to white standards--she is ashamed because the white storekeeper fails to validate her presence. Between them in the empty store, there is "The total absence of human recognition--the glazed separateness" (42). Pecola's shame begins to ebb when she leaves. When the crack in the sidewalk trips her, "Anger stirs and wakes in her . . . laps up the dredges of her shame. Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence," but it can't hold on for long: the "shame wells up again" (43).

If we are to help our students respond to Toni Morrison's call for love of self and dance Athol Fugard's vision of global politics on the dancefloor, we need to talk a good bit about constructing ourselves so that we will have the strength to make a difference in the multicultural makeup of our own institutions. Perhaps questions that Toni Morrison's texts problemitize are applicable here:

Why do black women, according to the narrator of Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, use the eye slide when they approach white girls?

What is the magic that Toni Morrison suggests little white girls, and little white dolls weave on whites and on black women, a magic Claudia doesn't think she has?

Why might Claudia, the narrator, transfer her hatred of white dolls, whose power appears to ignore her existence, to little white girls?

What is Toni Morrison suggesting by writing that Claudia's shame for hating little white girls then finds a refuge in love? ("Thus the conversion

from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraulent love. It was a small step to Shirley Temple" [22].)

Does the U.S. value African American anger more or less than African Amercian shame?

Why does the Caged Bird Sing?

Perhaps imagining a new kind of doll for our children would help us focus on our own construction. Morrison's reference in The Bluest Eye to Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy might remind us of culture's movement from producing these rag dolls, blatantly white, but not particularly gendered--other than the clothes and the hair--to our culture's giving children Barbie and Ken, who pretend to be anatomically correct. Why not give U S children a doll kit in which a no-skin, dun-colored, androgynous doll, perhaps with play-dough, flexible facial features can be constructed and reconstructed by the owner. I don't think including detachable anatomical parts would be smart. Such parts might encourage childred to replay Freud's blind and simplistic view of the little girl's lack.

African literature and African American literature speak eloquently to students as they explore their own constructions of self.

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